

Dust to Dust

Rictus was waiting at the top of the stairs. His smile was sweet. His words were not.

"You're a murderer now, my little man," he said. "Do you like the feel of Marr's blood on your hands?"

"He didn't kill her," Mrs. Griffin said. "She was never alive. None of you are."

"What are we then?" Rictus asked.

"Illusions," Harvey replied, ushering Mrs. Griffin and her cat past Rictus to the front door. "It's all illusions."

Rictus followed them, giggling insanely.

"What's so funny?" Harvey said, opening the door to let Mrs. Griffin out into the sun.

"You are!" Rictus replied. "You think you know everything, but you don't know Mr. Hood."

"I will in a little while," said Harvey. "Go and get warm," he told Mrs. Griffin. "I'll be back."

"Be careful, child," she said.

"I will," he told her, then closed the door.

"You're a strange one," Rictus said, his smile failing a little. His face, when his teeth no longer dazzled, was like a mask made of dough. Two thumb-holes for eyes, and a blob for a nose.

"I could suck out your brains through your ears," he said, all the music gone from his voice.

"Maybe you could," said Harvey. "But you're not going to."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've got an appointment with your master."

He started toward the bottom of the stairs, but before he reached it a dark figure flitted in front of him. It was Jive, and he was carrying a plate of apple pie and ice cream.

"It's a long climb," he said. "Put something in your stomach first."

Harvey looked down at the plate. The pie was golden brown and dusted with sugar, the ice cream melting in a sweet, white pool! It Certainly looked tempting.

"Go on," said Jive. "You deserve a treat."

"No thanks," Harvey told him.

"Why not?" Jive wanted to know, turning full circle on his heel. "It's lighter than I am."

"But I know what it's made of," Harvey said.

"Apples and cinnamon and-"

"No," said Harvey. "I know what it's really made of."

He looked back at the pie, and for a moment it seemed he glimpsed the truth of the thing: the gray dust and ashes from which this illusion was made.

"You think it's poisoned?" Jive said. "Is that it?"

"Maybe," Harvey replied, still staring at the pie.

"Well, it's not!" Jive said. "And I'll prove it!" Harvey heard Rictus make a warning sound behind him, but Jive didn't catch it. He plunged his fingers into the pie and ice cream and delivered them to his mouth in one swift motion.

As he closed his mouth Rictus said: "Don't swallow it!"

Again, too late. The food went down in one gulp. An instant later, Jive dropped the plate and began to slam his fists against his stomach, as if to

force the food up again. But instead of half-chewed pie, a cloud of dust issued from between his teeth. Then another; then another. Half-blinded, Jive snatched at Harvey's throat. "What...have...you...done?" he coughed.

Harvey had no difficulty shaking himself free. "It's all dust," he said. "Dirt and dust and ashes! All the food! All the presents! Everything!" "Help me!" Jive said, clawing at his mouth. "Somebody help me!" "There's no help for you now!" came a solemn voice, Harvey looked around. It was Rictus who had spoken, and he was retreating across the hallway, his hands clamped to his face. He stared at Jive between his fingers, his teeth chattering as he voiced the horrid truth. "You shouldn't have eaten that pie," he said. "It's reminding your belly of what you're made of." "What's that?" Jive said.

"What the boy says," Rictus replied. "Dirt and ashes!" Jive threw back his head, howling Noooo! at this, but even as he opened his mouth to deny it the truth came pouring forth: dry streams of dust that ran from his gullet and flowed over his angers. It was like a fatal message being passed from one part of his body to another. Touched by the dust his fingers began to crumble in their turn, and as they dropped, the same whisper of decay spread to his thighs and knees and feet. He started to drop to the ground, but with a final pirouette, swung himself around and grabbed hold of the banister. "Save me!" he yelled up the stairs. "Mr. Hood, can you hear me? Please! Please, save me!"

His legs crumbled beneath him now, but he refused to give up. He started to haul himself up the stairs, still yelling for Mr. Hood to heal him: There was no reply from the heights of the House, however, nor any sound now from Rictus. There were only Jive's pleas and wheezings, and the hiss of dust as it ran away down the stairs from the emptying sack of his body. "What's going on?" Wendell said, appearing from the kitchen with ketchup smeared around his mouth.

He stared at the cloud of dust that hung around the stairs, unable to see the creature at its heart. Harvey was closer to the cloud, however, and so was witness to Jive's last, terrible moments. The dying creature reached up with an almost fingerless hand, still hoping-even as its life drifted away-that its creator would come to save it. Then it sank down upon the stairs, and its last pitiful fragments crumbled.

"Somebody been beating the carpets?" Wendell said, as Jive's dust settled.

"Two down," Harvey murmured to himself.

"What did you say?" Wendell wanted to know.

Before he replied, Harvey glanced around the hallway, looking for Rictus. But Hood's third servant had disappeared. "It doesn't matter," Harvey said. "Are you done eating?"

"Yeah."

"Was the food good?"

Wendell grinned. "Yeah."

Harvey shook his head. "What does that mean?" Wendell asked.

Harvey was on the verge of saying: It means you can't help me; it means I have to go up and face Mr. Hood on my own. But what was the use? The House had claimed Wendell entirely. He'd be more of a hindrance than a help in the battle ahead. So instead he said: "Mrs. Griffin's outside."

"So we found her?"

"We found her."

"I'll go say hi," Wendell said with a cheery smile.

"Good idea."

Wendell had his hand on the door when he turned and said: "Where will you be?"

But Harvey didn't answer. He'd already climbed past the heap of dust that marked Jive's demise, and was nearing the top of the first flight, on his way to meet the power that lay waiting in the darkness of the attic.

XX

The Thieves Meet

Glimpsing the dusty truth masquerading as pie and ice cream was one thing, but scratching the veneer of deceptions that the House had polished to such perfection was quite another. As Harvey climbed the stairs he kept hoping he'd find some little detail in the walls or the carpets that would allow him to get his mind's fingers beneath the lid of this illusion and lift it up to see what charmless thing lay inside. If Marr had been made of stale mud and spittle, and Jive of dust, what was the House itself made of? But it knew its business too well. However hard Harvey stared, he could not pierce its lies. It delighted his senses with warmth and color and the scents of summer; it cooed softly in his ear and played its gentle airs against his face.

Even when he reached the dark landing at the top of the final flight, the House continued to pretend that this was just another innocent game of hide-and-seek, like the countless games it had seen played in its shadow.

There were five doors ahead of him, everyone of them ajar a few inches, as if to say: There are no secrets here, not from a boy who wants the truth. Come look! Come see! If you dare.

He dared, but not in the way the House had planned. After spending a few moments examining the doors, he ignored all of them, and instead went back down a flight, chose a strong chair from one of the bedrooms, brought it back upstairs, climbed onto it and pushed open the trapdoor that let onto the attic. It was hard work hauling himself up, but he knew, when he'd finished and lay panting on the attic floor, that his pursuit of Hood was almost at an end. The Vampire King was near. Who else but a master of illusions would live in a place so bereft of them? The attic was all the House was not: filthy, murky and cobwebbed.

"Where are you?" he said. It was no use thinking he could surprise the enemy. Hood had watched his ascent from the first stair. "Come out," he yelled, "I want to see what a thief looks like."

There was no reply at first, but then—from somewhere at the other end of the attic—Harvey heard a low, guttural growl. Not waiting for his eyes to become fully accustomed to the gloom he started toward the utterance, the boards creaking beneath his feet as he went.

Twice he stopped to look up, because a noise somewhere in the darkness overhead caught his attention. Was it a trapped bird, panicking as it flew blindly back and forth? Or roaches, perhaps, massed on the beams above him? He told himself to put such imaginings out of his head and concentrate on finding Hood. There were enough real reasons to be fearful here without inventing more. Unlike the area around the trapdoor, this end of the attic served as some kind of storeroom, and his enemy was surely lurking in the maze of rotting pictures and mildewed furniture. In fact, wasn't that a fluttering

motion he saw now out of the corner of his eye?

"Hood?" he said, squinting to try and make better sense of the shape in the shadows. "What are you doing hiding up here?"

He took another step forward, and as he did so he realized his error. This wasn't the mysterious Mr. Hood. He knew this shape, mangled though it was: the half-rotted wings; the tiny black eyes; the teeth, the endless teeth.

It was Carna!

The creature half rose from its squalid nest, snapping at Harvey as it did so. He made a stumbling retreat, and might have been seized after three steps had Carna not been so hobbled by its wounds and slowed by the chaos of its surroundings.

It struck out at the piles of detritus to the left and right of it, scattering chairs and overturning boxes; then hauled itself in pained pursuit of its prey. Harvey kept his eyes fixed upon the beast as he backed away, his mind buzzing with questions. Where was Hood? That was the main mystery. Mrs. Griffin had been certain he was up here somewhere, but Harvey had now wandered the attic from end to end, and its only occupant was the creature driving him back toward the exit.

He chanced several glances into the shadows as he retreated in case he'd missed some figure hiding there. It was not a human form his eyes alighted upon, however; it was a globe the size of a tennis ball, glowing as though filled with starlight. It appeared like a bubble from the boards and rose toward the roof. Momentarily forgetting his jeopardy, Harvey watched it as it ascended, joined by another, then a third and a fourth.

Astonished by the sight, he took too little care where he was walking. He stumbled, fell, and ended up sprawled on the hard boards, staring up at the roof through a red haze of pain.

And there above him was Hood, in all his glory.

His face was spread over the entire roof, his features horribly distorted.

His eyes were dark pits gouged into the timbers; his nose was flared and flattened grotesquely, like the nose of an enormous bat; his mouth was a lipless slit that was surely ten feet wide, from which issued a voice that was like the creaking of doors and the howling of chimneys and the rattling of windows.

"Child!" he said. "You have brought pain into my paradise. Shame on you!"

"What pain?" Harvey shouted back. He was shuddering to his marrow, but he knew this was no time to show his fear. He would deal in illusion, the way the enemy did; pretending courage even if he didn't feel it. "I came to get what was mine, that's all," he said.

Hood sucked one of the gleaming spheres into his mouth. Its light went out instantly.

"Marr is dead," he said. "Jive is dead. Gone to muck and dust because of you!"

"They were never alive," Harvey said.

"Did you not hear their sobs and pleas?" Hood demanded, the knots in his brow tightening. "Did you not pity them?"

"No," Harvey said.

"Then I will not pity you," came the rasping reply. "I will watch my poor Carna devour you from sole to scalp, and take pleasure in it."

Harvey glanced in Carna's direction. The beast had stopped advancing, but was poised to strike, its dripping jaws inches from Harvey's feet. Now that the beast was still, he could clearly see how badly wounded it was, its body as ragged as a moldy rug, its huge head drooping as though every breath was a burden.

As Harvey stared at it he remembered something Mrs. Griffin had told him:

"I would welcome Death now," she'd said, "like a friend I'd driven from my door."

Maybe it wasn't a journey to the stars that was awaiting Carna; maybe it was simply a return to the nothingness from which Hood had conjured it. But the creature wanted that gift nevertheless. It was weary and wounded, kept alive not by any will of its own but because Hood demanded its service.

"Such a pity..." the voice in the roof murmured.

"What is?" Harvey said, looking back at Hood, who had two more of the globes at his lips. "To lose you this way," he went on. "Can't I persuade you to think again? After all, I've done you no harm.

Why not come back and live here peacefully?"

"You stole thirty years of time with my mom and dad from me!" Harvey said.

"If I stay here you'll steal a lot more."

"I only took the days you didn't want," Hood protested. "The rainy days.

The gray days. The days you wished away. Where's the crime in that?"

"I didn't know what I was losing," Harvey protested.

"Ah," said Hood softly, "but isn't that always the way of it? Things slip from your fingers and when they're gone you regret it. But gone is gone, Harvey Swick!"

"No!" Harvey said. "What you stole I can steal back."

At this, a gleam ignited in the twin pits of Hood's eyes.

"You burn bright, Harvey Swick!" he said. "I've never known a soul that burned as bright as yours." He frowned as if studying the boy below. "Now I understand," he said.

"Understand what?"

"Why it is you came back."

Harvey began to say: I came for what you took, but Hood was correcting him before he'd uttered two words.

"You came because you knew you'd find a home here," Hood said. "We're both thieves, Harvey Swick. I take time. You take lives. But in the end we're the same: both Thieves of Always."

Repulsive as it was to think of himself in any way similar to this monster, there was some corner of Harvey that feared this was true. The thought silenced him.

"Perhaps we needn't be enemies," Hood said. "Perhaps I should take you under my wing. My west wing." He laughed mirthlessly at his own joke: "I can nurture you. Help you better understand the Dark Paths."

"So I'll end up feeding on children, like you?" Harvey said. "No hanks"

"I think you'd like it, Harvey Swick," Hood said. "You've got a streak of the vampire in you already."

There was no denying this. The very word vampire reminded him of his Halloween flight; of soaring against a harvest moon with his eyes burning red and his teeth sharp as razors.

"I see you remember," Hood said, catching the flicker of pleasure on Harvey's face.

Harvey instantly put a scowl in its place. "I don't want to stay here," he said. "I just want to get what's mine and leave."

Hood sighed. "So sad," he said. "So very sad. But if you will have what's yours, have death. Carnal" The beast raised its pitiful head.

"Devour the boy!"

Before the wretched beast could shift itself Harvey scrambled to his feet.

In the race to the trapdoor he knew he had little chance of outrunning Carna; but was there perhaps another way of laying the beast low? If he was a Thief of Always, as Hood had said, perhaps it was time to prove it. Not with dust, nor with stolen conjurings, but with the power in his own bones.

Carna took a threatening step toward him, but instead of retreating Harvey extended his hand in the creature's direction, as if to pat its decaying head.

It hesitated, its expression mellowing into doubt.

"Devour him..." the Vampire King growled.

The beast lowered its head, in expectation of punishment from above. But it was Harvey who laid his hand upon it; a gentle touch that sent a shudder through its body. It raised its snout to press itself against Harvey's palm, and as it did so, let out a long, low moan.

There was neither pain in the sound nor complaint. In fact it was almost a moan of gratitude, that for once it not be met with blows or with howls of horror. It turned its eyes up to Harvey's face, and a shudder of pleasure passed through its body. It seemed to know that the motion would prove fatal, because the instant after, it retreated from its comforter and as it did so its shudders multiplied, and its body suddenly flew into a thousand pieces.

Its teeth, which had seemed so fearsome moments before, rolled away into the darkness; its massive skull shattered; its spine collapsed. In a matter of seconds it was no more than a heap of bone shards, so dry and so aged even the most desperate dog would have passed them by.

Harvey glanced up at the face in the roof. Hood's expression was one of utter perplexity. His mouth was agape, his eyes staring from their pits.

Harvey didn't wait for him to break his silence. He simply turned his back on Carna's remains and hurried toward the trapdoor, half expecting the creature in the roof to slam it shut. There was no response from Hood, however, until Harvey was lowering himself down onto the chair on the landing. Only then, as Harvey took one last look up at the attic, did Hood speak.

"Oh my little thief..." he murmured. "What shall me do with you now?"

XXI

Tricks and Temptations

"You've done well," said the smiling face awaiting him at the top of the stairs.

"I wondered where you'd gone to," Harvey said to Rictus.

"Always ready to serve," came the unctuous reply.

"Really?" said Harvey, stepping down off the chair and approaching the creature.

"Of course," said Rictus. "Always."

Now that he was closer to the man, Harvey saw the cracks in his veneer. He was plastering on a smile, and smothering his words in butter and honey, but it was the sour smell of fear that oozed from his sickly skin.

"You're afraid of me, aren't you?" Harvey said.

"No, no," Rictus insisted, "I'm respectful, that's all. Mr. Hood thinks you're a bright boy. He's instructed me to offer whatever you want to make you stay." He spread his arms. "The sky's the limit."

"You know what I want."

"Anything but the years, thief. You can't have those. You won't even need them if you stay and become Mr. Hood's apprentice. You'll live forever, just like him." He dabbed at the sweat beads on his upper lip with a yellowed handkerchief. "Think about it," he said. "You might be able to kill the likes of Carna...or me...but you'll never hurt Hood. He's too old; too wise; too dead."

"If I stayed..." Harvey said.

Rictus's grin spread. "Yes?" he purred.

"Would the children in the lake go free?"

"Why bother about them?"

"Because one of them was my friend," Harvey reminded him.

"You're thinking of little Lulu, aren't you?" Rictus said. "Well, let me

tell you, she's very happy down there. They all are."

"No they're not!" Harvey raged. "The lake's foul and you know it." He took a step toward Rictus, who retreated as if in fear of his life, which perhaps he was. "How would you like it?" Harvey said, stabbing his finger in Rictus's direction. "Living in the cold and the dark?"

"You're right," said Rictus, raising his hands in surrender. "Whatever you say."

"I say set them free now!" Harvey replied. "And if you won't, then I will!"

He pushed Rictus aside and started down the stairs two at a time. He didn't have a clue what he was going to do when he got down to the lake, fish were fish, after all, even if they'd once been children; if he tried to take them out of the lake they'd surely drown in the air-but he was determined to somehow save them from Hood.

Rictus came after him down the flight, chattering like a clockwork salesman.

"What do you want?" he said. "Just imagine it and it's yours! How about your own motorcycle?" As he spoke something gleamed on the landing below, and the sleekest motorcycle human eyes had ever seen rolled into view. "It's yours, m'boy!" Rictus said.

"No thanks," Harvey said.

"I don't blame you!" Rictus said, kicking the motorcycle over as he sailed past it. "How about books? Do you like books?"

Before Harvey could reply the wall in front of him lifted like a great brick curtain, revealing shelf upon shelf of leather-bound volumes.

"The masterpieces of the world!" Rictus said. "From Aristotle to Zola! No?"

"No!" said Harvey, hurrying on.

"There's got to be something you want," Rictus said.

They were heading toward the final flight of stairs now, and Rictus knew he didn't have very long before his prey was out in the open air.

"You like dogs?" Rictus said, as a litter of yapping pups scampered up the stairs. "Pick one! Hell, have 'em all!"

Harvey was tempted, but he stepped over them and on.

"Something more exotic, maybe?" Rictus said, as a flock of brilliantly feathered parrots descended from the ceiling. Harvey waved them away.

"Too noisy, huh?" said Rictus. "You want something quiet and powerful. Tigers! That's what you want! Tigers!"

No sooner said than they padded into view in the hallway below; two white tigers, with eyes like polished gold.

"Nowhere to keep 'em!" Harvey said.

"That's practical!" Rictus conceded. "I like a practical kid."

As the tigers bounded off, the telephone on the table beside the kitchen door began to ring. Rictus was down the flight in two springs, and at the table in another two.

"Listen to this!" he said. "It's the President. He wants to give you a medal!"

"No he doesn't," Harvey said, tiring of this rigamarole now. He was at the bottom of the stairs and crossing to the front door.

"You're right," said Rictus, ear to the phone again. "He wants to give you an oil field, in Alaska!" Harvey kept walking. "No, no, I got that wrong! He wants to give you Alaska!"

"Too cold."

"He says: How about Florida?"

"Too hot."

"Boy! You're a difficult guy to please, Harvey Swick!"
Harvey ignored him, and turned the handle of the front door. Rictus slammed down the phone and raced toward him.
"Wait up!" he hollered, "wait up! I'm not done yet."
"You've got nothing I want," Harvey said, hauling open the front door.
"They're all fakes."
"What if they are?" said Rictus, suddenly hushed. "So's the sun out there. You can still enjoy it. And let me tell you, it takes a lot of magic to conjure up all these shams and hoaxes. Mr. Hood's really sweating to find you something you like."
Ignoring him, Harvey stepped out onto the porch. Mrs. Griffin was standing on the lawn, with Stew-Cat in her arms, squinting up at the House. She smiled when she saw Harvey emerge.
"I heard such noises," she said. "What's been going on in there?"
"I'll tell you later," said Harvey. "Where's Wendell?"
"He wandered off," she said.
Harvey cupped his hands around his mouth, and yelled: "Wendell! Wendell!"
His voice came back to him from the face of the House. But there was no reply from Wendell.
"It's a warm afternoon," said Rictus, idling on the porch. "Maybe he went...swimming."
"Oh no," Harvey murmured. "No. Not Wendell. Please, not Wendell..."
Rictus shrugged. "He was a goofy little kid, anyhow," he said. "He'll probably look better as a fish!"
"No!" Harvey yelled up at the House. "This isn't fair! You can't do this! You can't!"
Tears started to cloud his eyes. He wiped them away with his fists. They were both useless, fists and tears. He couldn't soften Hood's heart with weeping, and he couldn't bring down the House with blows. He had no weapon against the enemy but his wits, and his wits were about at an end.

XXII

Appetite

Oh, to be a vampire again, Harvey thought. To have claws and fangs and a hunger for blood upon him, like the hunger he'd had that distant Halloween; the hunger he'd turned from in disgust. He wouldn't turn from it now. Oh no. He'd let it swell the beast in him, so he could fly in Hood's face with his hatred razor-sharp.
But he wasn't a beast, he was a boy. It was the Vampire King who had the power, not him.
And then, as he stared up at the House, he remembered something that Rictus had told him at the door: "It takes a lot of magic to conjure up these shams and hoaxes," he'd said. "Mr. Hood's really sweating to find you something you like"
Maybe I don't need fangs to suck him dry, Harvey thought; maybe all I need is wishes.
"I want to talk to Hood," he told Rictus.
"Why?"
"Well...maybe there are some things I'd like. Only I want to tell him about them personally."
"He's listening," Rictus said, glancing back toward the House.

Harvey scanned the windows, and the eaves, and the porch, but there was no sign of any presence. "I don't see him," he said.

"Yes you do," Rictus replied.

"Is he in the House?" Harvey asked, staring through the open door.

"Haven't you guessed yet?" Rictus replied. "He is the House."

As he spoke a cloud moved over the sun. The roof and walls darkened, and the entire House seemed to swell like a monstrous fungus. It was alive! From the eaves to the foundations, alive!

"Go on!" Rictus said. "Speak to him. He's listening."

Harvey took a step toward the House. "Can you hear me?" he said.

The front door swung a little wider, and a sighing breath from the top of the stairs blew a cloud of Jive's dust out onto the porch.

"He can hear you," said Rictus.

"If I stay-" Harvey began.

"Yesss...?" said the House, making the word from creaks and rattles.

"-you'll give me anything I want?"

"For a bright boy like you..." came the reply, "...anything."

"You promise? On your magic?"

"I promise. I promise. Just say the word..."

"Well, for a start-"

"Yesss?"

"I lost my ark."

"Then you must have another, my lodestar," the Hood-House said. "Bigger. Better." And a board of the porch folded back as an ark three times the size of the first one rose into view.

"I don't want lead animals," Harvey said as he walked toward the steps.

"What then?" said Hood. "Silver? Gold?"

"Flesh and blood," Harvey replied. "Perfect little animals."

"I like a challenge," Hood said, and as he spoke a tinny din of bellows and roars rose from the ark, and the little windows were flung open and the doors flung wide and half a hundred animals appeared, all perfect miniatures: elephants, giraffes, hyenas, aardvarks, doves.

"Satisfied?" said Hood.

Harvey shrugged. "It's okay, I suppose," he said.

"Okay?" said Hood. "It's a little miracle."

"So make me another."

"Another ark?"

"Another miracle!"

"What would you like?"

Harvey turned his back on the Hood-House and surveyed the lawn. The sight of Mrs. Griffin, watching with puzzlement, inspired the next request. "I want flowers," he said. "Everywhere! And I don't want two alike."

"What for?" asked the Hood-House.

"You said I could have whatever I wanted," Harvey replied. "You didn't say I had to give you reasons. If I have to do that all the fun goes out of it."

"Oh, I wouldn't want that," the Hood-House said. "You must have fun, at all costs."

"So give me the flowers," Harvey insisted.

The lawn began to tremble as though a minor earthquake were underway, and the next moment countless shoots pressed up between the blades of grass. Mrs. Griffin began to laugh with delight.

"Look at them!" she said. "Just look!"

It was quite a show; tens of thousands of flowers bursting into blossom at the same time. Harvey could have named a few of them if he'd been quizzed: tulips, daffodils, roses. But most of them were new to him: species that only bloomed at night on the High Himalayas, or on the windswept plateaus of Tierra

del Fuego; flowers with blooms as big as his head, or as small as his thumbnail; blooms that stank like bad meat, or smelled like a breeze from Heaven itself. Even though he knew it was all an illusion, he was impressed, and said so.

"Looks good," he told the Hood-House.

"Satisfied?" it wanted to know.

Was its voice a little weaker than it had been earlier? Harvey wondered.

He suspected it was. He showed no sign of that suspicion, however. He simply said: "We're getting there..."

"Getting where?" said the Hood-House.

"Well," said Harvey, "I guess we'll know when we arrive."

A low growl of irritation came from the House, shaking the windows. One or two slates slid from the roof and smashed on the ground below.

I'm going to have to be careful, Harvey thought; Hood's getting angry.

Rictus echoed that thought.

"I hope you're not stringing Mr. Hood along," he warned, "because he doesn't like that kind of game."

"He wants me happy, doesn't he?" Harvey said.

"Of course."

"So how about something to eat?"

"The kitchen's full," said Rictus.

"I don't want pies and hot dogs. I want " He paused, ransacking his memory for delicacies he'd heard about. "Roast swan and oysters and those little black eggs-"

"Caviar?" Rictus suggested.

"That's it! I want caviar!"

"Really? It's disgusting."

"I still want it!" said Harvey. "And frog's legs and horseradish and pomegranates-"

The meals were already appearing in the hallway, plate upon steaming plate. The smells were tantalizing at first, but the more dishes Harvey added to the list the more sickly the mix became. He rapidly began to exhaust his menu of real meals, however, so instead of giving the House easy recipes like meatballs and pizzas, he started to invent dishes.

"I want crawfish cooked in cherry soda and horse steaks with jelly-bean sauce, and Boston Cream Cheese and pastrami soup-"

"Wait! Wait!" said Rictus. "You're going too fast."

But Harvey didn't stop.

"-and pumpernickel stew and snail fudge with pig's-foot clusters-"

"Wait!" the House howled.

This time, Harvey stopped.

In the heat of his invention he hadn't even looked to see if Hood was supplying him with these eatables, but now he saw all the dishes he'd demanded piled so high in the hallway that they were threatening to topple and float the ark on a noxious sea of sweetmeats and stews.

"I know what you're doing," said the Hood-House.

Uh-oh, Harvey thought; he's onto me.

He looked up from the feast at the door to the facade and saw that his plan to drain the House of its magic was indeed working. Many of the windows were now cracked or broken; the doors were peeling and hanging from their hinges; the porch boards were twisted and blighted.

"You're testing me, aren't you?" said Hood. His voice had never been melodious, but it was now uglier than ever: like the rumble of the Devil's belly. "Admit it, thief," he said.

Harvey took a deep breath, then said: "If I'm going to be your apprentice, I need to know how powerful you are."

"Are you satisfied?" the decaying House demanded.

"Almost," Harvey said.

"What more do you want?" it roared.

What more indeed, Harvey thought. His mind was reeling with these ridiculous lists; he had little left in the way of demands.

"You may have one final gift," the Hood-House said, "one final proof of my power. Then you must accept me as your Master forever and ever. Agreed?"

Harvey felt a trickle of cold sweat run down his spine. He stared at the teetering House, his mind racing. What was left to demand?

"Agreed?" the House boomed.

"Agreed," he said.

"So tell me," it went on. "What do you want?"

He looked at the tiny animals around the ark, and at the flowers, and at the food spewing through the door. What should he demand? One final request, to break Hood's back. But what? What?

A gust of chilly wind came from the direction of the lake. Autumn could not be far off: The season of dying things.

"I know!" he said suddenly.

"Tell me," the House replied, "tell me and let's have this game over owe and fur all. I want your bright soul under my wing, little thief."

"And I want the seasons," Harvey said. "All the seasons at once."

"At once?"

"Yes, at once!"

"That's nonsensical!"

"It's what I want."

"Stupid! Imbecilic!"

"It's what I want! You said one more wish and that's it!"

"Very well," said the House. "I will give it to you. And when you have it, little thief, your soul is mine!"

XXIII

The War of Seasons

Hood didn't waste any time. He'd no sooner made his final offer to Harvey than the balmy wind grew gusty, carrying off the lamb's wool clouds that had been drifting through the summer sky. In their place came a juggernaut: a thunderhead the size of a mountain, which loomed over the House like a shadow thrown against Heaven.

It had more than lightning at its dark heart. It had the light rains that came at early morning to coax forth the seeds of another spring; it had the drooping fogs of autumn, and the spiraling snows that had brought so many midnight Christmases to the House. Now all three fell at once-rains, snows and fogs-as a chilly sleet that all but covered the sun. It would have killed the flowers on the slope with cold, had the wind not reached them first, tearing through the blossoms with such vehemence that every petal and leaf was snatched up into the air.

Standing between this fragrant tide and the plummeting curtain of ice and cloud, Harvey was barely able to stay upright. But he planted his feet wide apart, and resisted every blast and buffet, determined not to take shelter. This spectacle might be the last he set eyes upon as a free spirit; indeed as a living spirit. He intended to enjoy it.

It was a sight to behold; a battle the likes of which the planet had never seen.

To his left, shafts of sunlight pierced the storm clouds in the name of

Summer, only to be smothered by Autumn's fogs, while to his right Spring coaxed its legions out of bough and earth, then saw its buds murdered by Winter's frosts before they could show their colors.

Attack after attack was mounted and repulsed, reveille and retreat sounded a hundred times, but no one season was able to carry the day. It was soon impossible to distinguish defeats from victories. The rallies and the feints, the diversions and encirclements all became one confusion. Snows melted into rains as they fell; rains were boiled into vapor; and sweated new shoots out through the rot of their brothers.

And somewhere in the midst of this chaos, the power that had brought it about raised its voice in a rage, demanding that it cease.

"Enough!" the Hood-House yelled. "Enough!"

But its voice-which had once carried such terrible authority had grown weak. Its orders went unnoticed; or if noticed, then disobeyed.

The seasons raged on, throwing themselves against each other with rare abandon, and in passing tearing at the House which stood in the midst of their battlefield.

The walls, which had begun to teeter as Hood's power diminished, were thrown over by the raging wind. The chimneys were wracked by thunder, and toppled; the lightning rods struck so many times they melted, and fell through the slateless roof in a burning rain, setting fire to every floorboard, banister and stick of furniture they touched. The porch, pummeled by hail, was reduced to matchwood. The staircase, rocked to its foundations by the growth in the dirt around it, collapsed like a tower of cards.

Squinting against the face of the storm, Harvey witnessed all of this, and rejoiced. He'd come to the House hoping to steal back the years that Hood had tricked from him, but he'd never dared believe he could bring the whole edifice down. Yet here it was, falling as he watched. Loud though the dins of wind and thunder were, they couldn't drown out the sound of the House as it perished and went to dust. Every nail and sill and brick seemed to shriek at once, a cry of pain that only oblivion could comfort.

Harvey was denied a glimpse of Hood's last moments. A cloud of dirt rose like a veil to cover the sight. But he knew the moment his battle with the Vampire King was over, because the warring seasons suddenly turned to peace. The thunderhead softened its furies, and dispersed; the wind dropped to an idling breeze; the fierce sun grew watery, and veiled itself in mist.

There was debris in the air, of course: petals and leaves, dust and ash.

They fell like a dream rain, though their fall marked the end of a dream.

"Oh, child..." said Mrs. Griffin.

Harvey turned to her. She was standing just a few yards from him, gazing up at the sky. There was a little patch of blue above their heads; the first glimpse of real sky these few acres of ground had seen since Hood had founded his empire of illusions. But it was not the patch she was watching, it was a congregation of floating lights-the same that Harvey had seen Hood feeding upon in the attic-which had been freed by the collapse of the House. They were now moving in a steady stream toward the lake.

"The children's souls," she said, her voice growing thinner as she spoke the word. "Beautiful."

Her body was no longer solid, Harvey saw; she was fading away in front of him.

"Oh no," he murmured.

She took her eyes off the sky and stared down at her arms, and the cat she was carrying in them. It too was growing insubstantial.

"Look at us," Mrs. Griffin said, with a smile upon her weary face. "It feels so wonderful."

"But you're disappearing."

"I've lingered here far too long, sweet boy," she said. There were tears glistening on her face, but they were tears of joy, not of sadness. "It's time to go..." She kept stroking Stew-Cat as they both faded from sight. "You are the brightest soul I ever met, Harvey Swick," she said. "Keep shining, won't you?" Harvey wished he had some words to persuade her to stay a little while longer. But even if he'd had such words, he knew it would have been selfish to speak them. Mrs. Griffin had another life to go to, where every soul shone. "Goodbye, child," she said. "Wherever I go, I will speak of you with love." Then her ghostly form flickered out, leaving Harvey alone in the ruins.

XXIV

A Fledgling Thief

He was not alone for long. Mrs. Griffin and Stew-Cat had no sooner vanished from sight than Harvey heard a voice calling his name. The air was still thick with dust, and he had to look hard for the speaker. But after a little time he found her, stumbling toward him.

"Lulu?"

"Who else?" she said, with a little laugh.

The lake's dark water still soaked her from head to foot, but as it ran from her body and into the ground the last traces of her silver scales went with it. When she opened her arms to him, they were human arms.

"You're free!" he said, running to her and hugging her hard. "I can't believe you're free!"

"We're all free," she said, and glanced back toward the lake.

An extraordinary sight met his eyes: a procession of laughing children coming toward him through the mist. Those closest to him were all but returned to their human shape, those behind them still shaking off their fishiness, step by step.

"We should all get out of here," Harvey said, looking toward the wall. "I don't think we'll have any trouble getting through the mist now."

One of the children behind Lulu had spotted a box of clothes in the rubble of the House, and announcing his find to the rest, stumbled through the debris to find something to wear. Lulu left Harvey's side to join the search, but not before she'd planted a kiss on his cheek.

"Don't expect one from me!" said a voice out of the dust, and Wendell stepped into view, beaming from ear to ear. "What did you do, Harvey?" he wanted to know as he surveyed the chaos. "Pull the place down brick by brick?"

"Something like that," said Harvey, unable to conceal his pride.

There was a roaring sound from the direction of the lake.

"What's that?" Harvey wanted to know.

"The water's disappearing," Wendell said.

"Where to?"

Wendell shrugged. "Who cares?" he said. "Maybe it's all being sucked to Hell!"

Eager to witness this, Harvey walked toward the lake, and through the clouds of dirt in the air saw that it had indeed become a whirlpool, its once placid waters now a raging spiral.

"What happened to Hood, by the way?" Wendell wanted to know.

"He's gone," said Harvey, almost mesmerized by the sight of the vortex.

"They've all gone."

Even as the words left his lips a voice said: "Not quite."

He turned from the waters, and there in the rubble stood Rictus. His fine jacket was torn and his face was white with dust. He looked like a clown; a laughing clown.

"Now why would I take myself off?" he asked. "We never said goodbye."

Harvey stared at him with bafflement on his face. Hood was gone; so was his magic. How could Rictus have survived the disappearance of his Master?

"I know what you're thinking," said Rictus, reaching into his pocket.

"You're wondering why I'm not dead and gone. Well, I'll tell you. I did some plannin' ahead." He drew a glass globe, which flickered as though it held a dozen candle flames, out of his pocket. "I stole a little piece of the old man's magic, just in case he ever got tired of me and tried to put me out of my misery." He lifted the globe up to his leering face. "I've got enough power here to keep me going for years and years," he said. "Long enough to build a new House, and take over where Hood left off. Oh, don't look so unhappy, kid. I got a place for you, right here-" He slapped his thigh. "You can be my bird dog. I'll send you out lookin' for kiddie-winkies to bring home to Uncle Rictus." He slapped his thigh a second time. "C'mon!" he said. "Don't waste my time now. I don't-?"

He stopped there, his gaze dropping to the rubble at his feet.

A terrified whisper escaped his throat. "Oh no..." he murmured. "I beg-"

Before he could finish his plea a hand with foot-long fingers reached up from the rubble and snatched hold of his throat, dragging him down into the dirt in one swift motion.

"Mine!" said a voice out of the ground. "Mine!"

It was Hood, Harvey knew. There was no other voice on earth that cut so deep.

Rictus struggled in his creator's grip, digging in the debris for some weapon. But none came to hand. All he had was his skill as a persuader.

The magic's yours," he said. "I was holding on to it for you!"

"Liar!" said the voice that rose from the debris.

"I was! I swear!"

"Give it to me then!" Hood demanded.

Where shall I put it?" Rictus asked, his voice a strangled croak.

Hood's hand loosened him a little, and he managed to haul himself to his knees.

"Right here..." Hood said, hanging onto Rictus's collar by his littlest digit, while his forefinger pointed down toward the rubble. "...Pour it into the ground."

"But-"

"Into the ground!"

Rictus pressed the globe between his palms, and it shattered like a sphere of spun sugar, its bright contents running out between his palms and into the ground in front of him.

There was a moment of silence; then a tremor ran through the rubble.

Hood's finger let its captive slip, and Rictus hurriedly got to his feet.

He had no chance to make an escape, however. Pieces of timber and stone instantly moved over the heaps of rubble toward the spot where he'd poured the magic, several lifted high into the air. All Rictus could do was cover his head as the hail increased.

Harvey was clear of this flying debris, and might well have made a retreat in these few moments. But he was wiser than that. If he fled now, he knew, his business with Hood would never be finished. It would be like a nightmare he could never quite shake from his head. Whatever happened next, however terrible, it would be better to see it and understand it than to turn his back and have his mind haunt him with imaginings to his dying day.

He didn't have to wait long for Hood's next move. The hand holding Rictus's neck suddenly let him go, and in a flash was gone from sight. The following moment the ground gaped and a form appeared, hunched over as it climbed out of its tomb in the rubble.

Rictus let out a cry of horror, but it was short. Before he could retreat one step the figure reached for him, and turning to face Harvey, held his traitorous servant high.

Here, at last, was the evil that had built the Holiday House, shaped more or less as a man. He was not made of flesh, blood and bone, however. He had used the magic Rictus had unwillingly provided to create another body.

In the high times of his evil, Hood had been the House. Now, it was the other way around. The House, what was left of it, had become Mr. Hood.

XXV

The Vortex

His eyes were made of broken mirrors, and his face of gouged stone. He had a mane of splinters, and limbs of timber. He had shattered slates for teeth, and rusty screws for fingernails, and a cloak of rotted drapes that scarcely hid the darkness of his heart from sight.

"So, thief-" he said, ignoring Rictus's pitiful struggles, "you see me as the man was. Or rather, as a copy of that man. Is it what you expected?"

"Yes," Harvey said. "It's exactly what I expected."

"Oh?"

"You're dirt and muck and bits and pieces," Harvey said. "You're nothing!"

"Nothing, am I?" said Hood. "Nothing? Ha! I'll show you, thief! I'll show you what I am."

"Let me kill him for you," Rictus managed to gasp. "You needn't bother! I'll do it!"

"You brought him here," Hood said, turning his splintered eyes on his servant. "You're to blame!"

"He's just a boy. I can deal with him. Just let me do it! Let me-"

Before Rictus could finish Hood took hold of his servant's head, and with one short motion simply twisted it off. A yellowish cloud of foul-smelling air rose from the severed neck, and Rictus-the last of Hood's abominable quartet-perished in an instant. Hood let the head go from his hand. It flew up into the air like an unknotted balloon, giving off a farting sputter as it looped the loop and finally fell, emptied, to the ground.

Hood casually dropped the body, which had summarily shrunk to nothing, and turned his mirrored gaze back upon Harvey.

"Now, thief," he said. "YOU WILL SEE POWER!"

His mane of splinters stood on end, as though every one of them was ready to pierce Harvey's heart. His mouth grew wide as a tunnel, and a blast of sour, icy air rose from his belly.

"Come closer," he roared, opening his arms.

The rags that clung there billowed, and spread like the wings of some ancient vampire; a vampire that had dined on the blood of pterodactyl and tyrannosaur.

"Come!" he said again. "Or must I come for you?"

Harvey didn't waste his breath with a reply. He'd need every gasp he had if he was to outpace this horror. Not even certain what direction he was taking, he turned on his heels and ran, as another blast of soul-freezing air struck

him. The ground was treacherous; slippery and strewn with rubble. He fell within six strides, and glanced back to see Hood descending upon him with a vengeful shriek. He hauled himself to his feet-Hood's rusted nails missing him by a whistling inch-and had taken three stumbling strides from Hood's shadow when he heard Lulu calling his name.

He veered in the direction of her voice, but Hood caught the collar of his jacket.

"Got you, little thief." he roared, dragging Harvey back into his splintery embrace.

Before Hood could catch better hold, however, Harvey threw back his arms and pitched himself forward. Off came the jacket, and he made a third dash for freedom, his eyes fixed on Lulu, who was beckoning him toward her.

She was standing on the edge of the lake, he realized, perched inches from the spinning waters. Surely she didn't imagine they could escape into the lake? The vortex would tear them limb from limb.

"We can't" he yelled to Lulu.

"We must!" she called back. "It's the only way!"

He was within three strides of her now. He could see her bare feet slithering and sliding on the slimy rock as she fought to keep her balance. He reached out for her, determined to snatch her from her perch before she fell, but her eyes weren't on him. They were on the monster at his back.

"Lulu!" he yelled to her. "Don't look!"

But her gaze was fixed upon Hood, her mouth agape, and Harvey couldn't help but glance back to see what fascinated her so.

Hood's pursuit had thrown his coat of rags into disarray, and there was something between its folds, he saw, darker than any night sky or lightless cellar. What was it? The essence of his magic, perhaps, guarding his loveless heart?

"Do you give up?" Hood said, driving Harvey back onto the rocks beside Lulu. "Surely you would not choose the vortex over me?"

"Go..." Harvey murmured to Lulu, his gaze still fixed on the mystery beneath Hood's coat.

He felt her hand grasp his for a moment. "It's the only way," she said.

Then her fingers were gone, and he was standing on the rocks alone.

"If you choose the flood you will die horribly," Hood was saying. "It will spin you apart. Whereas I-" He extended an inviting hand to Harvey, stepping up onto the rock as he did so. "I offer you an easy death, rocked to sleep on a bed of illusions." He made a smile, and it was the foulest sight Harvey had ever seen. "Choose," he said.

Out of the corner of his eye Harvey glimpsed Lulu. She had not fled, as he'd thought; she'd simply gone to find a weapon. And she had one: a piece of timber dragged out of the rubble. It would be precious little use against Hood's enormity, Harvey knew, but he was glad not to be alone in these last moments.

He looked up at Hood's face:

"Maybe I should sleep-" he said.

The Vampire King smiled. "Wise little thief," he replied, opening his arms to invite the boy into his shadow.

Harvey took a step over the rock toward Hood, raising his hand as he did so. His face was reflected in the shattered mirrors of the vampire's eyes: two thieves in one head.

"Sleep," said Hood.

But Harvey had no intention of sleeping yet. Before Hood could stop him, he grabbed hold of the creature's coat and pulled. The scraps came away with a wet tearing sound, and Hood let out a howl of rage as he was uncovered.

There was no great enchantment at his heart. In fact, there was no heart at all. There was only a void-neither cold nor hot, living nor dead-made not of

mystery but of nothingness. The illusionist's illusion.

Furious at this revelation, Hood let out another roar of rage, and reached down to reclaim the rags of his coat from the thief's hands. Harvey took a quick step backward, however, avoiding the fingers by a whisker. Hood came raging after him, his soles squealing on the rock, leaving Harvey with no choice but to retreat another step, until he had nowhere to go but the flood.

Again, Hood snatched at the filched rags, and would have had both coat and thief in one fatal grasp had Lulu not run at him from behind, swinging the timber like a baseball bat. She struck the back of Hood's knee so hard her weapon shattered, the impact pitching her to the ground.

The blow was not without effect, however. It threw Hood off balance, and he flailed wildly, the thunder of the vortex shaking the rock on which he and Harvey perched and threatening to toss them both into the maelstrom. Even now, Hood was determined to claim his rags back from Harvey, and conceal the void in him.

"Give me my coat, thief! " he howled.

"It's all yours!" Harvey yelled, and tossed the stolen rags toward the waters.

Hood lunged after them, and as he did so Harvey flung himself back toward solid ground. He heard Hood shriek behind him, and turned to see the Vampire King-the rags in his fist pitch headfirst into the frenzied waters.

The maned head surfaced a moment later, and Hood struck out for the bank, but strong as he was the vortex was stronger. It swept him away from the rocks, drawing him toward its center, where the waters were spiraling down into the earth.

In terror, he started to plead for assistance, his pitiful bargains only audible when the whirlpool carried him to the bank where Harvey and Lulu now stood.

"Thief!" he yelled. "Help me, and...I'll give you...the world!

For...ever...and ever..."

Then the ferocity of the waters began to rip at his makeshift body, tearing out his nails and rattling out his teeth, washing away his mane of splinters, and shaking his limbs apart at the joints. Reduced to a living litter of flotsam and jetsam, he was drawn into the white waters at the whirlpool's heart, and shrieking with rage, went where all evil must go at last: into nothingness.

On the shore Harvey put his arms around Lulu, laughing and sobbing at the same time.

"We did it..." he said.

"Did what?" said a voice at their backs, and they looked around to see Wendell wandering toward them, blithe as ever. Every article of clothing he'd found in the rubble was either too large or too small.

"What's been going on?" he wanted to know. "What are you laughing at? What are you crying for?" He looked beyond Harvey and Lulu, in time to see the last fragments of Hood's body disappear with a fading howl. "And what was that?" he demanded.

Harvey wiped the tears from his cheeks, and got to his feet. At last, he had a purpose for Wendell's perpetual reply.

"Who cares?" he said.

The wall of mist still hovered at the edge of Hood's domain, and it was there that the survivors gathered to say their farewells. None quite knew what adventures lay on the other side of the mist, of course. Each of the children had come into the House from a different year. Would they all find that age-give or take a month or two-awaiting them on the other side?

"Even if we don't get the stolen years back," Lulu said as they prepared to step into the mist, "we're free because of you, Harvey."

There were murmurs of thanks from the little crowd, and a few grateful tears.

"Say something," Wendell hissed to Harvey.

"Why?"

"Because you're a hero."

"I don't feel like one."

"So tell them that."

Harvey raised his hands to hush the murmurs. "I just want to say...we'll probably all forget about being here in a little while..." A few of the children said: no me won't; or, we'll always remember you. But Harvey insisted: "We will," he said. "We'll grow up and we'll forget. Unless..."

"Unless what?" asked Lulu.

"Unless we remind ourselves every morning. Or make a story of it, and tell everyone we meet."

"They won't believe us," said one of the children.

"That doesn't matter," said Harvey. "We'll know it's true, and that's what counts."

This met with approval from all sides.

"Now let's go home," said Harvey. "We've wasted too much time here already."

Wendell nudged him in the ribs as the group dispersed. "What about telling them you're not a hero?" he said.

"Oh, yeah," said Harvey with a mischievous smile. "I forgot about that."

The first of the children were already braving the wall of mist, eager to put the horrors of Hood's prison behind them as soon as possible. Harvey watched them fading with every step they took, and wished he'd had a moment to talk to them; to find out who they were and why they'd wandered into Hood's grip. Had they been orphans, with no other place to call home; or runaways, like Wendell and Lulu; or simply bored with their lives, the way he'd been bored, and seduced by illusions?

He would never know. They were disappearing one by one, until there was only Lulu, Wendell and himself left on the inside of the wall.

"Well," Wendell said to Harvey, "if time really is set to rights out there, then I'm going back a few more years than you."

"That's true."

"If we meet again, I'm going to be a lot older. You may not even know me."

"I'll know you," Harvey said.

"Promise?" said Wendell.

"I promise."

With that they shook hands, and Wendell made his departure into the mist.

He was gone in three strides.

Lulu sighed heavily. "Have you ever wanted two things at the same time," she asked Harvey, "but you knew you couldn't have both of them?"

"Once or twice," said Harvey. "Why?"

"Because I'd like to grow up with you, and be your friend," she replied, "but I also want to go home. And I think in the year that's waiting for me on the other side of that wall, you haven't even been born."

Harvey nodded sadly, glancing back toward the ruins. "I guess we do have one thing to thank Hood for."

"What's that?"

"We were children together," he said, taking hold of her hand. "At least for a little while."

Lulu tried to smile, but her eyes were full of tears.

"Let's go together as far as we can," Harvey said.

"Yes, I'd like that," Lulu replied, and hand in hand they walked toward the wall. At the last moment before the mist eclipsed them they looked around at each other, and Harvey said: "Home..."

Then they stepped into the wall. For the first stride he felt Lulu's hand in his, but by the second stride it had grown faint, and by the third-when he stepped out into the street it and she had gone completely, delivered back into the time from which she'd stepped, all those seasons ago.

Harvey looked up at the sky. The sun had set, but its pinkish light still found the ribs of cloud laid high above him. The wind was gusty, and chilled the sweat of fear and exertion on his face and spine.

Teeth chattering, he started home through the darkening streets, uncertain what awaited him.

It was strange that after so many victories the simple business of walking home should defeat him, but defeat him it did. After an hour of wandering, his wits and strength which had preserved him from every terror Hood could conjure failed him. His head began to spin, his legs buckled beneath him, and he fell down on the sidewalk, exhausted.

Luckily two passersby took pity on him, and gently asked him where he lived. It was dangerous, he vaguely recalled, to trust his life to total strangers, but he had no choice. All he could do was give himself over to their care, and hope that the world he'd returned to still had a little kindness in it.

He woke in darkness, and for one heartstopping moment he thought the black lake had claimed him after all, and he was down in its depths, a prisoner.

Crying out in terror he sat up, and to his infinite relief saw the window at the bottom of his bed, the curtains slightly parted, and heard the light patter of rain upon the sill. He was home.

He swung his legs out of bed and stood up. His whole body ached as though he'd gone ten rounds with a heavyweight boxer, but he was strong enough to hobble to the door and open it.

The sound of two familiar voices drifted up from the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm just happy he's home," he heard his mom say.

"So am I," said his dad. "But we need some explanations."

"We'll get them," his mom went on. "But we shouldn't push him too hard."

Clinging to the banisters as he went, Harvey started down the stairs, while his mom and dad continued to talk.

"We need to find out the truth quickly," his father said. "I mean, suppose he was involved with something criminal?"

"Not Harvey."

"Yes, Harvey. You saw the state of him. Blood and dirt all over him. He's not been out picking roses, that's for sure."

At the bottom of the stairs Harvey halted, a little afraid to face the truth. Had anything changed, or were the two people just out of sight still old and frail?

He went to the door and pushed it open. His mom and dad were standing with their backs to him at the window, staring out at the rain.

"Hello," he said.

They both turned at the same moment, and Harvey let out a whoop of joy to see that all the griefs and horrors of the House had not been endured in vain. Here was his prize, staring down at him: his mother and father, looking just the way they had before Rictus had come for him. The stolen years were back where they belonged, in his possession.

"I'm a good thief," he said, half to himself.

"Oh, my darling," said his mom, coming to him with open arms.

He hugged her first, then his dad.

"What have you been up to, son?" his dad wanted to know.

Harvey remembered how difficult it had been to explain everything last time; so instead of even trying he said: "I was just wandering around and I got lost. I didn't mean to get you upset."

"You said something about a thief."

"Did I?"

"You know you did," his dad said sternly.

"Well...are you a thief if you're taking something that belongs to you in the first place?" Harvey asked him.

His dad and mom exchanged puzzled looks.

"No, honey," his mom said. "Of course not."

"Then I'm not a thief," Harvey replied.

"I think you owe both of us the truth, Harvey," his mom said. "We want to know everything."

"Everything?"

"Everything," said his dad.

So he told them the whole tale, just as they'd asked, right from the beginning, and if their expressions had been doubtful the last time he'd related his adventures, they were incredulous now.

"Do you really expect us to believe all of this?" his father broke in while Harvey was talking about meeting Hood in the attic.

"I can take you to the House," Harvey said. "Or what's left of it. I couldn't find it last time, because it hid itself from grown-ups. But Hood's gone, so there's no magic left to hide it with."

Once again his mom and dad exchanged baffled looks.

"If you can find this Hood-House," his father said, "we'd both like to see it."

They set out early the following day, and this time-just as Harvey had expected-the way back to the House was not concealed by magic. He found the streets that Rictus had first led him along easily enough, and very soon the gentle slope on which the House had once stood came into view.

"That's it," he said to his mom and dad. "The House stood there."

"It's just a hill, Harvey," his dad said. "A hill covered in grass."

It was indeed a surprise to see that the ground on which so many terrible deeds had been done had greened so quickly.

"It all looks rather pretty," his mom said as they came to the place where the mist wall had stood.

"The ruins are under there, I swear," Harvey said, venturing onto the slope. "I'll show you. Come on."

They weren't the only visitors here today. There were several kite-flyers plying the wind at the top of the ridge; a dozen or more dogs romping around; children laughing as they rolled down the slope; even a pair of lovers, whispering in each other's ears.

Harvey resented the presence of all these people. How dare they romp and laugh and fly their kites here, he thought, as though it were just another hill? He wanted to tell them all that they were cavorting on the ruins of a vampire's house, and see how quickly that wiped the smiles off their faces.

But then, he thought, perhaps it was better this way; better that the hill not be haunted by rumors and stories. The name of Hood would probably never cross the lips of these lovers and kite-flyers, and why should it? His evil had no place in happy hearts.

"Well?" said Harvey's dad as the three of them climbed the slope. "This House of yours is well buried."

Harvey went down on his haunches and dug at the dirt with his bare hands.

The ground was soft, and gave off the sweet smell of fertility.

"Strange, isn't it?" said a voice.

He looked up from his labors, both his fists full of dirt. A man a little older than his father was standing a few yards from him, smiling.

"What are you talking about?" Harvey asked.

"The flowers. The ground," he said. "Maybe the earth has its own magic good magic, I mean-and it's buried Hood's memory forever."

"You know about Hood?" Harvey said.

The man nodded. "Oh yes."

"What exactly do you know?" Harvey's mom asked. "Our son here's been telling us such strange stories..."

"They're all true," the man said.

"You haven't even heard them," Harvey's dad replied.

"You should trust your boy," the man said. "I have it on the best authority that he's a hero."

Harvey's dad stared at his son with a twitch of a smile on his face.

"Really?" he said. "Were you one of Hood's prisoners?"

"Not me," the man said.

"Then how do you know?"

The man glanced over his shoulder, and there at the bottom of the slope stood a woman in a white dress.

Harvey studied this stranger, trying to make out her face, but her widebrimmed hat kept her features in shadow. He started to get to his feet,

intending to take a closer look, but the man said: "Don't...please. She sent me in her place, just to say hello. She remembers you the way you are young, that is-and she'd like you to remember her the same way."

"Lulu..." Harvey murmured.

The man neither confirmed nor denied this. He simply said to Harvey: "I am much obliged to you, young man. I hope to be as fine a husband to her as you were a friend."

"Husband?" Harvey mouthed.

"How time flies," the man said, consulting his watch. "We're late for lunch. May I shake your hand, young sir?"

"It's dirty," Harvey warned, letting the earth run between the fingers of his right hand.

"What could be better between us," the man replied with a smile, "than this...healing earth?"

He took Harvey's hand, shook it, and with a nod to Harvey's mom and dad hurried back down the slope.

Harvey watched as he spoke to the woman in the white dress; saw her nod; saw her smile in his direction. Then they were both gone, out into the street and away.

"Well..." said Harvey's dad, "...it seems your Mr. Hood existed after all."

"So you believe me?" Harvey asked.

"Something happened here," came the reply, "and you were a hero. I believe that."

"Then that's enough," said Harvey's mom. "You don't have to keep digging, sweetie. Whatever's under there should stay buried."

Harvey was about to empty his left hand of dirt when his dad said: "Let me have that," and opened his hand.

"Really?" said Harvey.

"I've heard a little good magic's always useful," came his father's reply.

"Isn't that right?"

Harvey smiled, and poured a fistful of earth into his father's palm.

"Always," he said.

The days that followed were unlike any Harvey had ever known. Though there was no more talk of Hood, or of the House, or of the green hill upon which it had once stood, the subject was a part of every look and laugh that passed between him and his parents.

He knew they had only the vaguest sense of what had happened to them, but they were all three agreed on one thing: that it was fine to be together again.

Time would be precious from now on. It would tick by, of course, as it always had, but Harvey was determined he wouldn't waste it with sighs and complaints. He'd fill every moment with the seasons he'd found in his heart: hopes like birds on a spring branch; happiness like a warm summer sun; magic like the rising mists of autumn. And best of all, love; love enough for a thousand Christmases.